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## **The Image of the Native Land in the Consciousness of the Polish Minority in Southern Bucovina (Romania) and Its Role in Sustaining a Group Identity**

### **Research subject and methodology**

This paper concerns the formation of a mythical image of the native land – Poland – in the consciousness of the Polish inhabitants of the Suceava district (Județul Suceava) in Southern Bucovina in Romania, comprising the villages of Poiana Micului, Solonețu Nou and Plesa. Their ancestors arrived in Bucovina in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, migrating from the regions of Wieliczka, Kałusz, Rzeszów and Tarnów, while the most numerous group came from the Čadca region in Slovakia, where they had settled two centuries before as migrants from the region of Żywiec and the land of Małopolska. Today, members of this group estimate its size at 1,300–1,600 people.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this enclave, smaller groups of Poles live at Gura Humorului, Suceava, Paltinos, Radowce, Solce, Kaczyce, the village of Bulaj and some other places.

The fieldwork connected with the problem in question was conducted in Romania and Poland. In Southern Bucovina (Romania), interviews were made in July and December 1999 and in January 2000. In 1999, supplementary fieldwork was done among the repatriates from Bucovina living in Piława Dolna near Dzierżoniów in Lower Silesia (the region of Wrocław in Poland), which provided an opportunity to make interesting comparisons with the information obtained in Romania. Standardised, questionnaire-based interviews were conducted with individual informants (two questionnaires were used: one in Romania and one in Lower Silesia). A total of 20 interviews were carried out, as well as a number of informal conversations to supplement the obtained material. These were complemented with participant observation (including such occasions as a wedding ceremony and party, a New Year's Eve party etc.) and with the analysis of expository texts for the general public and press

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<sup>1</sup> According to Emil Biedrzycki, the three villages under discussion had a total of ca. 1,250 inhabitants in 1969 (Biedrzycki 1973).

stories, in which evidence of mythical consciousness discussed in this paper is also found.

### **The Polish myth: its sources and vehicles**

The life of émigré communities involves a permanent confrontation of their own values and ideas, associated with their country of origin, with the relevant elements of culture and worldview in their current socio-cultural environment. A side effect of this confrontation is undoubtedly a sense of alienation, estrangement and separation, which fosters the development of mythological forms, known as “emigration myths” (Dzięgiel 1991:119).

Another source of the myth under discussion has been the lack of direct access to the territory of Poland (particularly acutely felt under communism). The image of the mother country has thus been shaped in the consciousness of the Polish expatriates by a mixture of school/historical knowledge and their own imagination. Even the image formed by those who do visit Poland has rather fragile empirical foundations (brief stays with the family in Poland or even work in the Old Country cannot be a substitute for permanent residence with its attendant daily problems). Therefore, the image of Poland is quite hazy and intangible. Its enigmatic character facilitates the development of a mythical dimension. As K. Braun points out: “... the structure of myth becomes ever clearer and its influence upon society is ever more powerful, as its foundations are getting darker, legendary, intangible” (Braun 1997:159). The same is claimed by M. Golka: “The existence of myths and their attractiveness follow, at least in part, from their intangibility” (Golka 1997:14).

Nowadays the Bucovina community has a better knowledge of Poland. Even so, it comes mainly through indirect channels: sermons and the social involvement of the Church (e.g. the organisation of summer camps in Poland for Bucovina children), Polish lessons in school (one of the main sources of the knowledge of Poland are the textbooks), the media, as well as contacts with visitors from Poland, who personify the idealised image of the mother country.

### **A multidimensional myth: the Polish myth and its historical and spatial aspects**

The vision of Poland is formed by the juxtaposition of two perspectives. On the one hand, Poland is viewed from a historical perspective. The image is based on the conviction that a land exists out there from which the ancestors came, marking the somewhat hazy beginnings of the group’s own history. “Our people” once came from there and so perhaps, in accordance with the “natural laws”, we shall “return” there. Such a perception of Poland is vertical in character, based on historical chronology and the sequence of the generations. On the one hand, Poland disappears in a nearly Eliadesque “mythical time” or the “time of the earliest beginning” – the informants are not certain whether the emigration took place 60 or 300 years ago. This reveals the

typically ahistorical understanding of its own descent on the part of the group, which is the very source of the strength of the myth, because – in Eliade’s view – the mythical time is the time “which cannot be found in the historical past” (Eliade 1999:57). The myth thus reveals its retrospective orientation, in accordance with I. Pańkow’s terminology: it is the “story of the golden time of the beginning, of Paradise lost” (Pawelczyk 1993:16–17).

On the other hand, the myth of Poland reveals its prospective character, as “a residue of an unfulfilled hope (the myth of a ‘promised land’ – a happy utopia, transcendent world, future social system, freedom regained etc.) (ibid.).

Apart from a temporal vision, Poland is also seen as a *concrete geographical space* (here the image of Poland takes a more horizontal character). The “mythical geography” is made up by towns and other places known from books, narratives and, possibly, short visits. They are distant spatially, but close on the emotional plane. The attachment to a faraway geographical space may combine here to some extent with the phenomenon of “taming” the space, or, to use Eliade’s term, its “cosmization”. The turning of chaos into cosmos, into the “tame space”, takes place through the placement of the symbols of the group’s own world in the alien world. “The only way to make a neighbourhood one’s own is by recreating, that is, sanctifying it”, wrote Eliade, quoting (among other things) the example of the conquistadors who put up a cross in the newly captured territories (Eliade 1993:62).<sup>2</sup> The areas of Poland now inhabited by repatriates from Bucovina have undergone a similar process: let us mention the village near Dzierżoniów christened Mikulanka by the inhabitants – a name reflecting the transfer of a “tame” element to their new home by the former inhabitants of Poiana Micului. “Tame” names can be given not only to topographical objects, but also to various forms of activity of the community members (e.g. folk ensembles), like the “Poiana” ensemble from Piława Dona or the “Dolina Nowego Sołońca” [Solonețu Nou Valley] from Złotnik. The part of Poland “re-cosmized” by the Polish families from Bucovina, repatriated in 1947, becomes closer and “tamer” for them.

Both orders outlined above take specific forms in particular visions of Poland. Far from being disjoined, they complement each other. The vision of the native land of the ancestors is superposed on a country one knows from television and from stories told by one’s close relatives and friends. This may account for the fact that, when asked about where exactly their ancestors had come from, some of the informants say: Poznań. Poland seems to them to have existed in its current shape from time immemorial: immutable like the reality petrified by myth.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Gut perceives a similar “cosmization” in the raising of a cross in the Nowa Huta borough of Cracow, against the objections of the communist authorities. The Nowa Huta Cross, as it was commonly referred to, became a symbol of the “cosmization” process, the “taming” of the space of Cracow’s working class borough (Gut 1993).

### Paradise with a touch of hell: the mythical vision of the native land

The spatiotemporal dimension, discussed above, provides merely a skeleton of the myth. But its content is equally important. It is likewise characterised by some dichotomy. The vision of Poland is by no means uniform and obvious. It is composed of often contradictory images which might be assigned to two distinct categories. The first is positive in character. Being mysterious, the vision is all the more fascinating, and distance induces one to make even greater sacrifices in order to come closer to it. Such a vision is very easily raised to the status of the sacred, acquiring supernatural or even paradisiacal qualities. This positive aspect clearly predominates in the overall image of Poland. But a negative version of this image does exist, too. In extreme cases, it can even become demonised. The vision of the mother country, through its ambiguity and lack of clarity, becomes darker. The distance between the informants and the object of their interest not only heightens their curiosity and fascination, but also increases their anxiety and fear of the unknown.

The informants, harbouring a positive image of Poland, emphasise that this is a place where the living is easier, where one is immersed in one's own cultural and religious environment. The supposed "easy living" in Poland is allegedly due to, among other things, technological superiority (*Here, a poor farmer has only a horse, and there, [even] a poor farmer has a tractor* [R5];<sup>3</sup> or: *They have ... houses there, and fields, and machines, and tractors. Here life is hard. We still farm with the horse, work by hand, keep walking up and down the mountains* [R1]). Even nature seems to contribute to the common cause (*[In Poland,] the earth bears all kinds of crops; here it doesn't* [R7]). The informants often make comparisons with Heaven (*When we got on the train for Poland, it was like going to Heaven* [R15]; or: *Here, potatoes wouldn't grow... And there, they burnt all the straw. It's like Earth and Heaven* [R5]).

The image of an ideal world is thus created, where everything comes easily, where the crops are always plentiful, where almost no work is necessary (*They are better off in Poland: at Piława, they don't work... Nobody has to work there to attain something; they just do enough work for a living* [R10]). Of course, some objective differences in living standards do exist between present-day Poland and Romania, but through the selective choice of only positive features ascribed to the former, the image becomes "deformed" (in the sense of the term used by Barthes) and hence acquires a mythical character. Such a selective approach is also revealed at a different level: the image of Poland in the eyes of the Bucovina Poles is mainly modelled on those parts of the country which they see when visiting their families – Lower Silesia and some other regions in the western part of Poland. The comparison of the fertile plains with the barren mountain soil of Bucovina is clearly in favour of Poland. One could only speculate about the image that would be created if the Romanian Poles lived on the fertile Moldovan Uplands and visited their relatives in the wilderness of the Bieszczady and the Beskid Niski Mountains.

Speaking about Poland, the informants emphasise such features as cleanliness, reliability, precision, considerateness, friendly disposition. Besides, all things found in

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<sup>3</sup> The interview transcripts (labelled R1, R2 etc.) are kept in the archives of the Ethnology Department, Jagiellonian University.

Bucovina which originate from the “ideal world” – Poland – are treated almost like a fetish. One example is a road constructed in part repayment of the debt owed to Poland by the Romanian government (*They had an excellent road built here* [R2]; *The Poles can afford to help another country and to build a road here. It's a nice piece of work, they checked everything and added an extra layer of asphalt* [R10]; *Nowhere in Romania do they have such a fine road as this one. It's like concrete* [R2]). The approach to other “Polish gifts” is similar: *I don't know how to thank the Poles for everything – they have sent us so much. A Polish priest came and gave me a pair of shoes. I've had them for so many years. Polish shoes. Must be twenty years old. So strong and good. They'll probably serve me till my dying day* [R11].

Yet another aspect of the image of Poland is the emphasis on “living among one's people”. The sense of being at home, with the family – in one's native land – combines here with an awareness of belonging to a certain culture (*They are happier there. They are on their own* [R2]; *In Poland, there's more unity... A Pole supports a Pole* [R8]; *The first time I was there it felt like going to my native land. I was exulted – going to my home country* [R9]; *When they go to Poland to study, they settle down there and don't want to stay in Romania* [R12]. The Poles are perceived as a “different culture”, “more highly civilised”. This is supposedly reflected not only in the behaviour of the Poles, but even in their looks (*When you have lived in Poland for 10 or 15 years, your looks change and your face becomes different. You have absorbed that culture* [R9]; *Shops are so clean and orderly over there. Unlike here, where the shoppers shout: “Give me! Give me!” It's a well organised country and a civilised people* [R15]; *It's a different culture, different living conditions* [R9]; *Poles are more highly cultured* [R8]).

A further component of the idealised vision of Poland is exemplary religiousness, linked with the view of Roman Catholicism as a core attribute of the Poles. Therefore, it is assumed that in the country of the Poles, the faith should automatically become strengthened (*In Poland, the faith is deeper. Here, we have more Romanian priests than Polish ones* [R4]).

The negative image of Poland stresses air pollution (*Here... the air is crisper, better. In Poland, it's worse; there are more factories there* [R10]) and the poorer quality of food products (*The food is somehow different. Even milk. It's healthier here than in your country. Pickled beetroot are distinctly worse in Poland. Here, farm animals are fed on natural hay* [R10]). The informants often mention the higher crime rate in Poland and a moral decline (exemplified not only by the large number of divorce cases, but also by abortion).

### **The role of the Polish myth in the formation of group identity**

The Polish myth functions at various levels and in various contexts: in the cultural and religious spheres, in the historical, as well as spatial dimensions. All these aspects are significant from the point of view of group identity (custom, language, faith, group history – in the context of names and intergenerational continuity, as well as the group's own space: its native land). It seems that the Polish myth has a significant impact on at least some dimensions of identity. “Polish nationality” seems to be a core

feature of the entire identity structure, the mortar that holds together its particular layers. It is manifested through language, names, origin, culture, religion and in the spatial dimension. These numerous shared characteristics indicate that at all three levels: of local identity (own village), regional identity (own region, that is, Bucovina) and state/national identity (own country/nation), Polish elements do appear. Even a “Romanian identity” (usually understood in terms of belonging to the Romanian state, rather than nation) does not have to stand in contradiction with the “Polish identity”. The very phrase “Poles from Romania”, customarily used self-referentially by the informants, reveals the presence of both identities, Polish and Romanian. The two seemingly contrasting elements appear side by side in this context.

The strength of the Polish identity appears to be a direct consequence of the Polish myth, firmly entrenched in the collective consciousness of the Bucovina Poles. As long as the sources of this myth, discussed above, exist (including, in particular, a sense of isolation and estrangement), along with its vehicles (the activities of priests, schools, local press etc.), it will continue to function in both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions. The dominant position of an idealised vision of Poland certainly reinforces the formation of a Polish national identity. One can only speculate about the course the evolution of this complex identity structure would take, should the current proportion between the positive and negative aspects of the vision of Poland be upset.

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